

Should eminent academics stop publishing?

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In this piece, I want to address a relatively controversial and sensitive topic, which may seem to be somewhat farfetched, and deals with the question whether eminent (and often older, senior or retired) academics should stop publishing in academic journals. While this question may seem to be somewhat ludicrous to those who never reflected on the issue before, there are actually quite some valid reasons to reflect on this very issue, which I will outline below. Currently, we as academics live in a hypercompetitive environment where publications are the key determinant of the possibility to pursue an academic career, especially in the higher-ranked and prestigious universities. Obviously, the author is aware of the current debates and trends in universities which tend to emphasize a the relevance of a broader range of outcomes and achievements for the establishment of an academic career, such as grant income, reputation (e.g., key-notes at international conferences), and so forth. However, one has to be naïve to think that such achievements would replace the value of the academic publication, and the entire academic system is still built on prestige resulting from both quality *and* quantity of publications. Moreover, the reader will notice that many of the arguments about publications will also hold for grant income, resource distribution, keynote presentations and so on. In such a hypercompetitive environment in which we function as academics, access to journal space is a great privilege, which is usually unequally distributed. Such access is often granted to eminent academics, because of a variety of reasons, whereas newcomers (often young early career researchers in precarious positions) are struggling to get their work published, and can only look in envy at those prolific eminent scholars around them. In the piece below, I will outline what the problem is and how we can solve it.

Why would I raise this issue? There were two specific instances why the issue presented itself as something that needed further reflection, especially as I have not seen anything about it (if the reader

does have references, please contact me). First, I had to review a paper submission which was about a study conducted on retired academics who held various post-retirement positions at universities across the world, and who were flying around the world for research visits multiple times a year (the study was obviously conducted pre-Covid). My main concern with the paper was that valuable resources (i.e., time, energy, money) were spent by academics to study this hyperprivileged group of older, white, almost exclusively men, retired academics. Why the need to study this group in particular and understand their experiences? There was no critical angle to the study, and I kept on wondering how we relate to eminent (and older) academics more generally in academia. While resources are scarce, are these resources distributed in a dignified way?

A second reminder was an analysis conducted by a FoWOP Group (www.futureofwop.com) led by Yvonne van Rossenberg, which focused on authorships in top-tier Work Psychology journals. The analysis showed that there is a dominance of the 1% of most prolific authors, who take up to 30% of the journal space in the top journals. All of these 1% most publishing academics in the field of work psychology are eminent scholars – after all, eminence is gained primarily through one's publication record. Most are older, white men (but not all!), and they take up a disproportionate part of journal space, and the majority of them also occupy editorial positions in these same journals (thus controlling access to journal space). The full set of findings from that analysis will hopefully be published soon. Both examples reminded me of the need to reflect on the role eminent academics play in the system. While it is hard to generalize across all scientific disciplines, I will primarily talk about psychology and management, as those fields are closest to my own experiences and observations.

The case for a publication stop for eminent academics

Many of the taken for granted assumptions in our work as academics are invisible and rarely discussed. One of the more frequently discussed assumptions is the importance and the institutional structures of academic publishing. Almost every academic researcher conducts her research to publish the outcomes in academic journals. We expect this process to be fair and offering a proper chance of

getting published in journals, irrespective of our personal backgrounds and merely judged on the basis of the validity of our scientific work and arguments. However, the publication system is not fair, and offers priority access to writers with a reputation and a well-known name. At a EURAM conference some years ago, I attended an editor-session, and only one editor of a management journal was honest enough to acknowledge that he wanted to get big names to publish in his journal, as this boosts readership and citations. It is a well-known fact that big names are more likely to be read and cited. It also gives credibility to a paper when you cite well-known authors. This is never solely about the strength and validity of scientific argumentation, but primarily about impression management (just as we are more likely to cite from top-tier journals to enhance credibility of our work). Nonetheless, it shows how the system operates, and that we have to disengage from our beliefs in a truly fair academic system, as this turns out to be a myth.

Such big names are often older, eminent academics, who have built their reputation over the years by publishing in top-tier journals. Once they have built their reputation, it becomes much easier for them to publish their work in journals, because editors know that their names are associated with higher citation numbers, regardless of the actual quality of their work. Through this process, a self-fulfilling prophecy unfolds ('the emperor is naked!'): older, eminent scholars have easier, privileged access to journals, and other academics cite their work in an attempt to get published themselves, which then again boosts reputation of the eminent scholar.

It is also important to note that academic publishing functions like any addiction: once the positive emotions of the acceptance letter in the email inbox are experienced, it craves for a return of those feelings, a desire to go through that positive mood again of 'being accepted', being part of an academic community, and being recognized for one's hard work. The most prolific authors in work psychology publish more than 25 papers a year, or one paper every two weeks. While this may satisfy individual desire for growth of the publication list, it neglects the problematic issues attached to it.

A first point is that journal space is usually restricted, and thus, papers and authors compete with each other for limited journal space (but the system is changing with new commercial, open-

access journals like *Frontiers in Psychology*, which have a strong incentive to publish as much as possible as these journals function on the basis of authors paying to get published). Top-tier journals nowadays reject up to 95% of the submissions. This does not mean that only 5% is good enough and that 95% of the research submitted is below-standard. It merely means that editors like to control access to their journals in ways that are entirely unknown to the wider academic community. Of course, they officially declare to focus only on quality, but this cannot be true if 95% of submissions is rejected – this would indicate that 95% is not ‘good enough’, and that 95% of the research that we do is just not good enough for our own journals. By taking up (to 30% of available) journal space, eminent academics outcompete younger and early-career researchers (and researchers in less privileged positions), who are desperately trying to publish their work in order to secure a permanent position in the precariousness of contemporary academia. Instead of making space for younger academics to let their voices be heard, eminent academics fulfil their desires for endless publication records. What is their right to privileged access to journal space in comparison to young scholars who need the space to establish an academic career? There is no fair competition for younger academics in the ‘publication game’, and it is only because of socialization in the system and their career dependence on the same, established, eminent academics, that the system is accepted as it is. Meanwhile, eminent academics continue to make use of their easier access into journals, thereby damaging the chances of early career researchers (or making them dependent upon them through inclusion of co-authorship). It also needs to be asked why they insist on continuing to publish in academic journals, as most eminent academics are not dependent upon their publications anymore for their careers, especially as most of them will have permanent, secure positions at universities. If it is merely about their personal satisfaction or addiction to the publication system, we need to ask more serious questions about the system itself.

Moreover, we can also contemplate what is actually published by that same group of eminent scholars. A straightforward counterargument against the above is that eminent scholars take up so much space in journals, because of their inherent greatness and the greatness of their work. When

the quality of their work is just so much better, why critique it, and plea for more 'suboptimal' work to be published in journals? After all, this is the status quo in our journals, where the names of eminent scholars are appearing on so many papers, if it is not as primary authors, then as co-authors of their student's or colleagues' work, who may get published with incremental research and eminent names as co-authors. I know what I am talking about; I have experiences of desk-acceptances of papers when big names were attached as co-authors of my own papers. However, this arguments ignores two fundamental aspects: first, it ignores the maintenance of the status quo that is perpetuated through these eminent scholars, as they generally are likely to repeat themselves and project their ontological and epistemological foundations on their fields, their students and their colleagues. Second, it ignores *what* they are publishing, and the ways they dictate and shape the debates in our fields.

Usually, eminent academics achieved their eminence through hyper-specialization, or through focusing on one topic or concept and publish on this topic over and over again. It is not surprising that in recent years, a debate has emerged about self-plagiarism, which is essentially the tendency of academics to literally repeat themselves over again. Hence, eminent academics do not just take up valuable and limited space in journals, they also tend to do this by merely repeating themselves and their well-known and over-researched concepts. True innovation, new radical ideas, and ground-breaking work is generally not to be expected from eminent academics, and thus by taking up a disproportionate share of limited space in journals, they also restrict new, radical (and more interesting) ideas to get into these journals. This process is obviously amplified as eminent academics tend to function as gatekeepers as well in their roles of journal editors. Even more so, young scholars learn that the easiest way to get into (top-tier) journals is to conduct incremental research that stays within the boundaries set by the ruling elites, and focused on the status-quo. It has often been discussed among work psychologists how boring the flagship journal of that field (the *Journal of Applied Psychology*) is (or has become). While eminent (and usually older, white, man, American) authors have privileged access to journals like these, scientific progress is actually stifled in this system, and actual societal issues are either neglected or moulded into mainstream discourse that only

superficially deals with societal issues, rather than to truly critically and deeply engage with them. Modesty of established, eminent academics would suit here, and it would be a sign of inter-generational solidarity to step back, and give space to younger academics to let their voices be heard (which is indeed happening in younger and fringe journals). For instance, while work psychology is supposed to be about behavior of individuals and groups in the workplace, the field hardly comprises anything in established journals around grand societal issues such as climate change, racism, inequality, and political instabilities and how they affect workplace behaviors. If journals allow contributions on these themes, it usually is done in a way that questions about the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of such enormously important societal issues are not asked – instead such societal issues are merely moulded into mainstream discourse which prevents necessary radical questions from being asked (e.g., about how inequalities undermine employee or organizational performance).

In sum, we have to ask to which extent eminent academics make use of the current system, or perhaps abuse the system, to gain privileged access into (top-tier) journals. Thereby, they do not just take up scarce journal space, but also stifle scientific advancement, as most eminent academics tend to hold on to that which brought them their reputation. For eminent academics, it is simply so much easier to repeat themselves and not critically reflect upon their own work and practices, and just stick to what they have been doing for the last decades and that what brought them their fame. It is a shame though, as eminent scholars are in a unique position, as they often have a *carte blanche* in their own universities to do what they want to do. When they engage in more critical thought and work themselves, it is not just a sign of courage and intellect, they are also in a position to have a lot of influence on others in academia. In other words: eminent scholars have a choice to make: either use their privilege to maintain and justify the system, or to make use of their entitlements to create a more positive work environment for all academics, and to use their voice for the good. It is a shame we rarely see this happening, and many eminent academics desperately clinging on to their identities and how they have constructed those throughout their careers.

The case against a publication stop for eminent academics

There are (obviously) some arguments against the above reasoning. The primary argument perhaps is based on academic freedom, and the unlikelihood of excluding eminent academics to be part of the 'publication game'. If submitting a paper to a journal is a free act (and it should be), eminent academics should not be prohibited from submitting their work to academic journals. The current piece is obviously not arguing for a ban on and regulation and monitoring of manuscript submission by eminent academics, but calls for a reflection among senior academics about their own practices. However, as explained above, the publication system is unfair, especially for young and early career academics, and this unfairness should be resolved. It is systemic and thus a matter of changing the publication system (e.g., through making submissions truly blind to editors, so that they can make their decisions purely without knowing the author), as well as ideological, and thus internalized into the core beliefs and fantasies of academics.

It can also be argued that I am too biased against the work of eminent academics, and I also have to acknowledge that I have read (some) interesting work of eminent academics over the last years (e.g., the piece of Dennis Tourish about nonsense in management studies; [Tourish, 2020](#)). However, such examples remain (rare) exceptions to the rule, as the reproduction of form and content is driven primarily by established academics, who have a lot of interest in retaining the status-quo, as their careers have been built on established norms of how to conduct research and how to write papers. Changing the system to allow unheard voices to be expressed will first of all harm the interests and status of eminent academics, and it is therefore not surprising if a call for modesty of eminent academics will be met with great resistance. However, eminent academics will always have the opportunity to let their voices be heard, either via books or directly via platforms such as Researchgate or LinkedIn (just as this piece is not submitted to a journal). By stepping back, they will provide space for other voices and people to enter the field. It would be great if eminent academics may get rid of their publication addictions (or publication fetish, evidenced by the incredibly high number of papers

published by eminent academics which can only be understood in terms of workaholism), by perhaps starting to only publish 1 article per year, which would open up the space for many younger scholars to have fairer chances of getting access to journal space.

Another argument for eminent academics not to be restricted in their academic expressions, is that they hold the power positions, and therefore are in a better situation to actually change the system from within, and change existing practices for the better. I would really like to believe in this argument, if it was not the case that it is a reversal of the problem – the fact that the establishment in academia *is* the obstacle to positive change, and not the solution. It is not the early career researchers who have invented the precarious system of insecure, temporary contracts dependent upon the well-known axiom of publish-or-perish, but the existing establishment. This is not a matter of personal responsibility for the current system, and it is certainly not a matter of holding individuals (and thus eminent scholars) accountable for the current system and the practices in our publication system. However, it is about responsibilities though, and the responsibilities of both individuals and collective groups in academia to strive and contribute towards positive change. It was a collective group of academics (mostly early career researchers though without much power) that wrote a [Manifesto for the Future of Work and Organizational Psychology](#), in which a collective program for change was described, including both steps we can take in the short run and in the long term. It remains our hope that more eminent academics will join the movement and be a force for positive change in academia.

I imagine that critics will call me a hypocrite and a populist, as has happened before when I criticized science and academic practices. Having quite a long publication list myself, I am part of the problem. Yet, it also reminds me of a sign I have seen at the Occupy Amsterdam movement in 2011, where I joined the protests. The Dutch sign read (in translation): ‘I am a hypocrite, but I’m trying’. This nicely summarizes our current predicament in society, as well as in academia. All established and eminent academics are part of the system, and each of them/us have played their role in maintaining the

system. The question, however, is to what extent older academics accept their responsibilities in changing the system, and provide new ideas for (radical) change and improvement of the system. Too often, eminent academics point to the limitations of the current system, without proposing changes and accepting their own role in the system. A bit more modesty, and the acceptance of their/our own irrelevance would suit the contemporary state of academia.

Any feedback or reaction welcome. Either via Researchgate or mbal@lincoln.ac.uk